

INTEGRATION OF THEORY AND PRACTICE IN SOCIAL WORK: CHALLENGES AND TRIUMPHS

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INTRODUCTION

Teaching (in any discipline) is rewarding when students show the required growth and development in terms of their knowledge, skills and attitude (within the social work context) (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002). So it is disappointing when, in completing various assessment tasks, some students do not achieve the learning objectives set for a given task. The most troubling within the UWC context was the challenges students experienced on the third year level in integrating their theoretical knowledge with their practice learning.

Teaching and developing understanding is the process of developing the learner's knowledge and skills (Caspi & Reid, 2002). This is echoed by Ramsden (2003), who asserts that teaching is the vehicle used to make it possible for students to learn. Hence teaching and learning require objectives to be set, because "there is no such thing as learning in itself" since learning is "a change in the way we conceptualize the world around us" (Ramsden, 2003:41). Therefore the way that teaching is facilitated relates to the teaching methods and learning activities that the teacher uses within a context that is relevant for students (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). As far as context is concerned, Ramsden (1992) asserts that teachers must consider who their students are. Furthermore, teachers must understand students "in all their complexity, considering how their various strengths and weaknesses contribute to what they know, and what these strengths and weaknesses imply for their potential as learners" (Ramsden, 1992:181). Thus Ramsden (1992) affirms that it is vital that teachers understand the characteristics of their students and implement appropriate learning approaches.

Most students at UWC originate from previously disadvantaged communities and may be academically under-prepared and not familiar with academic discourse (Bozalek, 2009; Breier, 2010; Dykes, 2009). Therefore they may need a carefully selected teaching model, method, strategy and techniques in order to achieve the expected learning outcomes. Third-year social work student evaluations indicate that there is a perception that the classroom learning environment is often not conducive to facilitating the integration of theory and practice. Furthermore assessments of social work fieldwork competence at UWC indicate that the majority of the students in the third year of study struggle to integrate theory and practice (Department of Social Work Quality Assurance Report, 2007).

There is a dearth of research about the integration of theory and practice in social work education in the context of Exit-Level Outcomes (ELOs) prescribed by the South African Council for Social Services Professions (SACSSP). This study intends to address this gap in our knowledge by exploring the experiences of lecturers and third-year social work students in terms of the challenges of integrating theory and practice in the context of ELOs.

This study had the following research objectives:

- to explore and describe students' experiences of the strategies and techniques employed by lectures to facilitate the integration of theory and practice in fieldwork education;
- to explore and describe the teaching strategies and techniques employed by lecturers to facilitate the integration of theory and practice; and
- to explore recommendations to integrate theory and practice on third-year level within the context of OBE and exit-level outcomes of the profession.

INTEGRATION OF THEORY AND PRACTICE AS CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A primary outcome for all professions is that future practitioners would be able to integrate their formal knowledge base with fieldwork practice and embed it in this practice (Clapton, Cree, Allan, Edwards, Forbes, Irwin, MacGregor, Paterson, Brodie & Perry, 2008). The central concern is “to bridge the gap between theory and practice, and between classroom and the field”, which “has preoccupied social work education since its very beginning” (Clapton *et al.*, 2008:334; Vaicekauskaite, Algenaitė & Vaiciulienė, 2010; Wrenn & Wrenn, 2009). There are few attempts in social work to define what the “integration of theory and practice” entails (Clapton, Cree, Allan, Edwards, Forbes, Irwin, Paterson & Perry, 2006:650). These authors have highlighted the definition provided by Gibbons and Gray, which refers to “the integration between the individual and society, art and science, field and classroom” (Clapton *et al.*, 2006:650). Integration thus means connecting different aspects of the same phenomenon and not viewing these aspects in opposition to each other (Clapton *et al.*, 2006).

A definition that provides clarification and insight into what integration means for social work is proffered by the University of Minnesota Duluth (2013): “Integrating theory and practice refers to the process whereby connections are made between the social work knowledge, values, and skills learned in the classroom and the practice experience individuals are facing in field. Students must be given the opportunity to understand what skills were needed during the interaction, the knowledge that informed the action, and the social work values that influenced the interaction” (University of Minnesota Duluth, 2013). This definition combines the traditional triad of knowledge, values and skills and sets the terrain for what is to be integrated.

Regarding the place where this learning is to occur, Beder (2000:46) views the social work agency as the “site for learning and integration of knowledge”, because it is through fieldwork and supervision that the student would learn to practice within a professional context using the theory and knowledge gained in the classroom (cf. also Bogo & Vayda, 2004; Noble, 2001). Fieldwork practice and agency placements are thus vital mechanisms for the integration of theory and practice.

OUTCOMES-BASED EDUCATION AS THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

An outcomes-based approach to education clarifies to teachers and learners what learners should be able to demonstrate after the learning process has been completed. In

OBE the curriculum, instruction and assessment are focused on the desired outcomes learners must achieve, i.e. the knowledge, competencies and qualities the learner has achieved should be demonstrated (Spady, 1994). Outcomes-based education (OBE) was adopted as framework for the study. Specific components of OBE are expounded that clarify its significance for the study: OBE as context for integration of theory and practice in social work education, and OBE and social constructivist learning theory.

Outcomes-based education as context for theory and practice integration in social work education

The education system in South Africa is aimed at making education more relevant, accessible and transparent to all (Department of Education, 2004). Spady (1994) asserts that outcomes in OBE refer to demonstrations of the learner's highest development. He goes further to say that outcomes are the acquired knowledge, skills and attitudes that the learner must have in order to advance to the next level (Spady, 1994).

A set of learning outcomes should ensure integration of theory and practice as well as progression in the development of concepts, skills and values through the assessment standards. In OBE learning outcomes do not prescribe content or methods. Furthermore, assessment strategies in OBE are evidence-based and linked to learning outcomes (Department of Education, 2004).

The SAQA Act legislated that South African tertiary institutions adapt curricula to meet the requirements of OBE. In terms of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) tertiary institutions offering the BSW degree were required to conform to the assessment standards as prescribed by the SAQA and therefore the SACSSP, which is authorised by SAQA. These standards entail a theoretical as well as a practical component in the social work qualification, which are assessed according to 27 exit-level outcomes (ELOs). The integration of theory and practice is purposefully aimed at enhancing the students' competency and skills (SAQA, 2003).

Outcomes-based education and constructivist learning theory

Constructivist learning theory supports the notion that learning is a process through which meaning is constructed or the process through which people make sense of their experiences (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Constructivism refers to a theory of knowledge that purports that the world is essentially complex, truth does not exist as an absolute and much of what we know is constructed by our beliefs and social environment. Furthermore, constructivist theorists assert that learning is a process in which knowledge (past and current knowledge or experiences) is applied in a "real-world context"; this approach is also referred to as social constructivism (Dalgarno, 2001).

Constructivist teaching and learning strategies and the integration of theory and practice

In constructivism a learning environment needs to be constructed in which the adult learner can reflect on his/her own experiences and (social work) practices in an engaging way together with lecturers, and where all participants are at liberty to interrogate

assumptions of knowledge (one's own and that of others) and to critique and reflect upon such knowledge (Dalgarno, 2001). This premise also underscores experiential learning which means to learn from experience (Amstutz, 1999) and is essential in understanding and facilitating adult learning. This approach to learning underscores the value of social work fieldwork training.

Constructivism is used as the foremost approach in understanding experiential learning in its focus on "cognitive reflection upon concrete experiences" (Fenwick, 2001:vii). To implement experiential learning and constructivist learning methods, the social work curriculum must have measurable outcomes stating what the learning is supposed to do. In addition, the institution of learning should be committed to the belief that all learners have the capacity to learn and grow (Jansen & Christie, 1999). The value of experiential learning is that learners are provided with a safe environment for learning to take place. A safe environment is based on respect for diversity and affirmation by the facilitator (Green & Von Schlicht, 2003) as well as the learner's experience that his/her opinions are valued and respected (Collins & Van Breda, 2010). In such an environment assessment is open and transparent (Rust, 2002).

In constructivist learning theories the lecturer as expert is not dismissed, but this role is modified to be the facilitator of learning. In this way the learners construct knowledge by collaborating with others in a cooperative setting and engaging in issue-based learning (Dalgarno, 2001). The lecturer as facilitator encourages and accepts that the learner is independent and can take the initiative (Brooks & Brooks, in Tam, 2000). In this context the facilitator of learning creates and maintains a collaborative, learning environment for learners to construct their own knowledge, while the facilitator acts as guide (Tam, 2000). The role of the teacher thus shifts from "knowledge transmission to knowledge building" (Bellefeuille, Martin & Buck, 2005:374). This means that the teacher provides sufficient learning opportunities for students to interact and engage with each other to build their own knowledge and understanding. Bellefeuille *et al.* (2005:374) aver that the role of the student changes from receiving knowledge from the "expert" to constructing their own knowledge and thus taking on more responsibility for their own learning.

Issue-based learning

Issue-based learning methods include case studies and reflective exercises such as analysing policies, or an article in a journal or newspaper. It "represents a particular construction about the process of learning that emphasizes the active role of the learner in constructing knowledge that is meaningful to them and increases their understanding" (Whittaker, 2009:123). It is an active approach to learning that encourages the learner to think about what he/she has learnt and how this knowledge can be used in practice (Whittaker, 2009). Issue-based learning therefore promotes deep-rooted learning and encourages critical thinking and analytical reasoning (Oko, 2008).

Cooperative learning

Cooperative learning is the use of small groups in the classroom setting. It is particularly useful in large classes, but more so because it enables the individual student to maximise

his/her own learning and that of others in the group. Similar to issue-based learning, the student is actively involved in the process of learning and constructing knowledge (Bitzer, 2004). Hence learning takes place by students engaging with others. Therefore the development of the learner's understanding requires learners to be actively involved in the process of meaning making.

RESEARCH APPROACH AND STRATEGY

The research objectives of exploring students' learning experiences and teaching strategies influenced the decision to choose a qualitative research approach. Our assumption was that knowledge of the challenges in integrating theory and practice would be derived from the experiences of the people involved with the issue. The research relied on interpretive inquiry, inductive analysis and the meanings that participants attribute to the issue.

A combined exploratory-descriptive design, utilising a case-study tradition of enquiry, was the most appropriate means to satisfy the concern for better understanding the experiences of participants (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2003). A blended approach was used, because we wanted to gain insight into participants' experiences of the challenges (exploratory) as well as get specific information about these challenges (descriptive). In so doing, we obtained thick descriptions and deeper meanings of participants' experiences. In qualitative research such an approach allows for extensive examination of the problem and deeper meaning that result in rich, thick data obtained from participants (Rubin & Babbie, 2005). Thus the research was conducted with 16 students and 8 lecturers involved with third-year-level teaching and learning in the Social Work Department at UWC.

Purposive sampling was the most appropriate sampling technique for selecting students to participate. We were specifically searching for representative and differing data. Students who were recruited scored less than 59% average in the social work theory modules and less than 59% in the fieldwork module for participation in the study, amounting to 16 students. The rationale was that they would be able to provide rich data relating to the issue at hand because an average mark (59% and lower) indicates that students are struggling to integrate theory and practice, and meeting only the minimum expected learning outcomes. The students' average mark was based on lecturers' and field supervisors' assessments of these students. The 16 students were assigned to two focus groups of 8 students each according to their availability. Utilising a semi-structured interview schedule, students reflected on their experiences of integrating theory and practice. A typical example of a question is: "What teaching styles do you think assisted you in the integration of theory and practice?"

Purposive sampling was also employed for selecting lecturers teaching at undergraduate level in the Social Work Department at UWC, because they all have first-hand knowledge of facilitating learning to integrate theory and practice. Teachers were required to provide written responses to a semi-structured list of questions. Teachers reflected on 8 questions regarding their teaching practices to facilitate the integration of

theory and practice. A typical example of a question is: “Describe some of your teaching methods that you used in class to facilitate the integration of theory and practice”.

There was a strong correlation between the questions asked of students and lecturers in order to obtain rich descriptions on the issue from both perspectives. Therefore data collection occurred concurrently. We arrived at the findings by using thematic analysis as described by Creswell (2007) by aggregating information into clusters and providing details that support the themes. To verify all the data we made use of the following: a critique checklist (facilitated by a colleague in the Social Work Department), member checking (facilitated by the participants) and reflexivity (facilitated by the researchers). Reflexivity was particularly important in this study because of our own involvement as teachers in the BSW at UWC. Therefore we followed the methodological criteria as proposed by Babbie and Mouton (2001) for a qualitative case study strategy, so that this bias did not unduly influence and manipulate the data and outcomes of the study. We used reflexivity as a method of ensuring trustworthiness by drawing on guidelines provided by Mays and Pope (2000).

Additionally, we used three principles for ensuring the credibility of qualitative research, namely structural corroboration, consensual validation and referential adequacy (Eisner, 1998). In terms of the first principle, we compared various forms of data to substantiate or oppose our interpretation of the findings. In terms of the second principle, a colleague was asked to examine our descriptions, interpretations and conclusions. In terms of the third principle, referential adequacy or criticism was facilitated by a colleague who constantly challenged our ideas about the themes, findings and our interpretation of the data and the literature. The assistance of colleagues and participants in verifying and providing critical feedback enhanced the authenticity of the findings.

DISCUSSION OF CORE THEMES

Theme 1: Student expectations of learning and knowledge required

Student participants expressed in no uncertain terms that they experience a huge gap between what is taught in the classroom and what is expected and happening in a “real-world” context. They had very strong views on the issues that influence their ability to integrate theory and practice.

“I think every time we learn a new theory we can’t click on immediately ... That’s why the role-plays were useful because then you see what, what the theory really mean ...”

“With [mentions lecturer’s name]... we had role plays; we could integrate everything (meaning knowledge, skills and values) we had in the role plays. We could actually say and identify what we did. ...That’s how we could identify the theory immediately more clearly.”

“Sometimes the theory [meaning the lecture] comes after we have done the tasks in the field.”

In a learner-centred environment there is a dual function for content. The dual function is “a means and an end of instruction” (Weimer, 2002:51). In other words, facilitators of

learning can use content as a resource to develop learning skills as well as promoting self-awareness of learning. This will generate a more intricate and connected relation between content and learning. Hence, the workload and its management should be aligned in order to achieve learning outcomes and learning should be facilitated by building on previous learning (Gravett, 2004a). Thus “good teaching involves monitoring and improving the effectiveness of the curriculum, how it is taught and how students are assessed” (Ramsden, 2003:120).

Theme 2: Structure of the third-year programme

Student participants experienced that the workload of the third-year programme was overwhelming and that they struggled to keep abreast of the academic demands. Students seemed to experience “over-assessment” and reported feeling overwhelmed by the amount of assessment work for the third-year programme in general. Learning outcomes and assessment strategies are not always explicit and students did not always know what was expected of them.

“I think maybe we do not have enough time to write our reports. Maybe we only have one day to write our reports, [be]cause this [second] term is a lot of work. So we submit our assignments late.”

“It was hectic for me. I also think the time issue... The thing is we also have to go to our practical, and Monday or maybe Friday we go to the development youth programme. So it's also taking time.”

“The only time you have to write reports is over weekends, because it is doing reports and sometimes you are not ready to submit your reports.”

Kember (2004) asserts that one way to measure workload is to calculate number of hours worked. This translates into the amount of class time and independent study time. In his research undertaken with Hong Kong students, average hours were 43.5 hours (Kember, 2004). In the social work programme at UWC, average hours were 42.8 (taken as 120 credits across the third year of study equating to 1 200 notional learning hours divided by 28 academic weeks). But Biggs and Entwistle argue that “it is the students’ perception of the variable (workload) which should be taken into account, rather than some ‘objective’ measure” (Kember, 2004:166). Thus a negative perception would reflect the degree of students’ stress or pressure experienced. A negatively perceived workload “can be a negative influence on student learning through being associated with a tendency to encourage surface approaches to learning” (Kember, 2004:168).

A study by Bozalek (2009) that was undertaken with fourth year social work students at UWC to have a module accredited, indicated that learning outcomes are pre-determined and standardised in accordance with OBE principles. Therefore learner driven knowledge and learner input into curriculum development is constrained because students have to adhere to the outcomes prescribed and to timeframes predetermined by the university calendar (Bozalek, 2009). This notion of inflexibility can contribute to the pressure being experienced by students and thus to feeling overloaded.

Theme 3: Scaffolding learning

Student participants were also concerned that the tasks are not scaffolded in such a way that their previous learning prepared them sufficiently for fieldwork practice. Students experienced that this “scattered” learning content did not adequately prepare them for expectations relating to intermediate learning outcomes. Practicum tasks often preceded the lectures and thus they were not adequately prepared for assignments in practice.

“I think maybe in second year maybe if they can introduce the casework in there ... it will prepare the second-year students for the third year.”

“I would suggest that in second year the students they must have clients just to have the knowledge...” [Meaning to have experience and exposure to working at micro-level intervention]

“I think [mentions lecturer’s name and module] should not be on Thursdays. It should be on Tuesdays because For instance, if you are going to do a needs assessment, for instance, on Thursdays she will talk about needs assessment of which we already doing that. So you don’t know what to do because you haven’t done the theory.”

Ausubel (in Gravett, 2004b) asserts that learning happens in relation to previous learning. This occurs when previous learning is used as a scaffold for learning new knowledge (Hay, Kinchin & Lygo-Baker, 2008). Scaffolding is a process in which students are given support until they can apply new skills and strategies independently (Rosenshine & Meister, 1992). From participants’ responses it is evident that they want to see the links between the current learning and their learning in the previous year and/or build on existing knowledge/tasks.

Theme 4: Strategies for facilitation of learning (students and lecturers)

Student participants expressed their opinions on the teaching styles and methods of lecturers. There were three aspects that participants pointed out with regard to their preferences and the teaching styles of lectures.

Firstly, students asserted their preference for an interactive and co-operative style of facilitating learning. This style makes use of social constructivist teaching and learning strategies and techniques, which facilitates integration of theory and practice.

“I think we are used to [mentions lecturer’s name] and his style of lectures. And he has interaction. He takes a break with an activity [e.g. discussion of a case study] that actually forms part of the lecture ... and remains in the topic.”

“With [mentions lecturer’s name] ... we had role plays; we could integrate everything [meaning knowledge, skills and values] we had in the role plays. We could actually say and identify what we did. ... That’s how we could identify the theory immediately more clearly.”

“She a lecturer] also does have group discussions and it also helped us to understand [theory], because at first we didn’t understand what she was talking about...”

Student participants indicated that through the role plays and (small) group discussions they felt more enabled to identify and distinguish between theory and practice. Students were clear about their teaching preferences; they wanted to participate, they wanted activities such as role plays and group discussions.

Secondly, students appreciated group activities in classrooms, but asserted that working in groups for assignments for shared marks are not experienced as “teamwork” and are a source of frustration.

“I don’t mind working with anyone; the problem is just like everyone’s apology must be acceptable ... and just because you [are] my friend it is acceptable. It should not be like that. Everyone’s opinion should be acceptable.”

“They wouldn’t attend [referring to group members]. And at the end of the day we receive the same uh marks.”

“Because everyone ... I would say maybe half of the group didn’t participate ... But half of the group did do maybe the whole assignment, where as others have just... they just had a little input for the assignment.”

Here students expressed their irritation with group assignments, especially other students’ tardiness or not attending meetings or not fulfilling their agreed-upon tasks. They also reflected the difficulty when having to deal with uncooperative classmates as group members. They felt that these students shouldn’t receive the same marks. These feelings are corroborated by research done with Asian students at a New Zealand university by Li and Campbell (2008:205), where student participants held “intensely negative” opinions about doing group assignments (for shared marks). These participants identified their sources of frustration as being members’ attitudes and level of willingness to cooperate as well as the different cultural beliefs of group members. These authors also highlighted concerns about “social loafing and free riding”, which implies “inequality of contribution and effort” (Li & Campbell, 2008:205). Although group assignments meet at the requirements for constructivist teaching methods, they are generally viewed as “emotionally and socially demanding with unclear benefits for students” (Volet & Mansfield, 2006:342). These authors point to the role of the lecturer in managing the group processes and alleviating these frustrations (Li & Campbell, 2008; Volet & Mansfield, 2006).

Thirdly, participants mentioned that PowerPoint presentations are generally used in class and provide visual as well as auditory stimulation as a modern tool of communication. However, this sample noted some disadvantages in these presentations, remarking on the lack of stimulation in mere reading of slides. The following comments illustrate typical reactions.

“... [be]cause what she is doing, she will organise all the slides ... and then she will read the notes on the slides and not explain what does that mean.... So even in, in her slides you just read the slides, but you don’t know the words that you can understand.”

“She [referring to a lecturer] always uses abbreviations most of the time and she does not explain what that abbreviation means.”

“If you count [referring to the PowerPoint slides] it is about 33 slides and she will teach us that in one day. That will be one lecture; which is too much slides for one lecture.”

Student participants did not approve of the way some lecturers used PowerPoint presentations, although they did appreciate the mode of facilitation in itself. Teater (2011:576) asserts that though some social work educators still found that didactic or content-driven teaching provided “better knowledge gain for students”, there is a body of knowledge attesting to the value of constructivist teaching benefits for students (Sieminski & Seden, 2011; Tuchman & Lalane, 2011; Wehbi, 2011). Gitterman (in Teater, 2011) states that didactic methods enforced the dichotomy between theory and practice, and Wehbi (2011) found that constructivist teaching methods increased information retention.

The lecturers provided narratives clarifying their use of both didactic and interactive teaching and learning strategies. They emphasised, however, that Social Work lecturers do not have any formal training in facilitation of learning and that this limitation might affect teaching and learning (see also Teater, 2011 in this regard). Some examples of interactive teaching and learning strategies used by lecturers regarded as successful are indicated below.

“Students are also in groups of 4, with a checklist on a specific technique. Two students will then do an interview, while the others look at the checklist and guide students where they were wrong or give them marks for peer evaluation. During presentations the lecturer will give input on the specific topic. Students sometimes also do practical work during lectures, applying the theory via case studies or using their own experiences.”

“I generally use three modes of teaching and learning facilitation: I divide the time between (i) content-driven or introductory facilitation of information to set up their small group discussions; (ii) small group discussion around a selected case study or newspaper article; and (iii) report back from small group discussions and then integrating theory with the practice on the basis of the case study discussion.”

“Using case studies, topical issues, newspaper articles to trigger aim of lecture and discussion around it; small group discussion and feedback. I generally refer to their macro projects constantly, so that the implementation of theory becomes comprehensible. Students can connect strongly with social issues and with values from their own background experiences. Elicits much input and participation.”

In their narratives lecturers expanded on the teaching methods they used: small group discussions; peer assessment and feedback; didactic methods; and issue/problem learning materials such as newspaper articles and case studies. In her research Wehbi (2011) found that in-class teaching methods such as drama, video-making, games and

simulation exercises enhanced students' critical thinking skills and that students felt empowered and motivated.

Theme 5: Academic background of students

Lecturers perceived that there are difficulties in the integration of theory and practice within the classroom setting. These challenges were exacerbated by students being under-prepared for tertiary education.

“Students find it easy to verbally explain how they used/applied ELOs, but when it comes to writing, they struggle.”

“The quality of students in terms of previous learning is also not well and students come from disadvantaged schools with limited understanding of analysing and implementing theory.”

“There is also a variety of comprehension by students, some are excellent, with good background in education and others are very poor in learning.”

Lecturers mentioned student difficulties especially in articulating their thoughts and opinions in written form as well as their general lack of comprehension. Lecturers viewed the source of these difficulties as the poorly resourced schools which the majority of students come from. Van der Merwe and De Beer (2006:548) aver that assessing student potential is “complicated by unequal schooling in South Africa”. Confirming this, Bozalek (2009), Breier (2010) and Dykes (2009) concur that some students are generally under-prepared for academic discourse and have inadequate language skills, which result in poor reading and academic writing skills in some students. Under-preparedness means “the student ... is, on either an academic, emotional and/or cultural level, prepared inadequately to deal with the demands of higher education” (Brussow & Wilkinson, 2010:374). Students may well be under-prepared for a number of reasons, says Engstrom (2008). In the US context these reasons are not dissimilar to those relevant to SA, namely inadequate schooling, competing family demands, lack of English language competency and unfamiliarity with academic discourse. Brussow and Wilkinson (2010) point to the importance of the knowledge and experience of academic staff in creating an optimal teaching environment that is enabling for under-prepared students.

CONCLUSIONS

This research set out to examine the challenges experienced by students and lecturers with regard to the integration of theory and practice within the context of OBE principles. Research objective 1 focused on students' experiences of the teaching strategies of lecturers in the facilitation of theory and practice integration. Two themes from the data are of importance here.

In theme 1 student expectations of learning and the kinds of knowledge required that speaks to the content of the course or module emerged. Students reflected their initial difficulties in understanding theory and the perceived gap between what was being taught (content) and the “real world”. Students found didactic and content-driven teaching practices generally not conducive to their learning. Students reported that they

could understand the theory when alternative methods were used. They preferred ownership of their own learning through learner input, independent learning and small groups using case studies and topical issues that relate to their experiences (also see theme 3). The benefits that students derived from these teaching practices indicated aspects of experiential and constructivist learning. In this way this study did not differ from the literature as issue-based learning “represents a particular construction about the process of learning that emphasizes the active role of the learner in constructing knowledge that is meaningful to them and increases their knowledge” (Whittaker, 2009:123). This method of learning helps the student to see the links between theory and practice, and promotes deep learning as opposed to surface learning as it encourages critical thinking and analytical reasoning (Oko, 2008). Students emphasised the gap between class-based learning and real-world issues. This finding is in keeping with the literature (Clapton *et al.*, 2008; Vaicekauskaite *et al.*, 2010; Wrenn & Wrenn, 2009).

In theme 2 students’ reports on the structure of the third-year Social Work programme furthered the impression of students being over-burdened. Several elements converged into one telling picture: students felt overwhelmed by the number of formative tasks from all the modules (not just from Social Work but also from external service modules). There are ten modules altogether on third-year level at UWC, each module vying for the undivided attention of the student. Students’ claims of over-assessment may well be true. Adding to students feeling over-whelmed is the claim that learning outcomes and assessment strategies are unclear and ambiguous. Gravett (2004a), Hay *et al.* (2008) and Vella (2000) all confirm that when students are over-burdened, this is not conducive to theory-practice integration. Thus it is clear why students experienced difficulties in this learning area.

The structure of the content of the module or programme is also important for the scaffolding of learning. Students particularly reflected the disjuncture between the timing of learning in the Social Work theory modules and in practice education. Hence the resultant uncertainty about practice tasks and the theory underlying intervention approaches. In addition, Brussow and Wilkinson (2010) assert that time constraints in the academic programme are seen as affecting the learning environment for (especially) the under-prepared student.

Research objective 2 focused on exploring lecturers’ teaching strategies to facilitate the integration of theory and practice. Lecturers did report on the kinds of teaching practices that they used in class, which can be linked to constructivist methods (Theme 4). Student participants, however, cast doubt on the extent of the use of these methods in class. It can be assumed that these methods are partially and insufficiently used in class in terms of students’ learning preferences. Students’ learning style preferences are also linked with student expectations of learning content and teaching strategies (also discussed in theme 1 above).

Lecturers also expressed an additional challenge relating to inadequate secondary schooling (Theme 5). A concern was that students continued to experience the consequences of under-preparedness in their third year in terms of their ability to understand and integrate theory with practice. Schenck (2009) states that educational

disadvantage is exacerbated by other personal challenges such as having to care for siblings and the household, which have an impact on the conditions necessary for studying effectively.

Research objective 3 focused on recommendations to integrate theory and practice on third-year level. On the basis of the above discussion, the following recommendations are offered regarding the facilitation of learning in the classroom setting for the integration of theory/knowledge and practice.

- Baseline and diagnostic assessment of the prior learning experiences of students should be done at the outset of the teaching programme during the first few lectures (theory modules) and supervision sessions (practice education modules) at all year levels.
- Coursework modules should not only be designed in such a way that assessment tasks and criteria are clearly aligned to learning outcomes, but also in a language style that can be easily understood by students. Module outlines are often (and inadvertently) presented in the writing and language style of the lecturer, who can easily forget whom the outline is primarily intended for. The same principle applies to reducing the ambiguity of what assessment tasks entail and how each one will be marked (assessed). In our experience, this simple shift reduces the tension and anxiety of the student considerably. Additionally, referring to the assessment task regularly throughout teaching and learning activities with the class also helps “to reduce the mountain to a molehill”. Depending on the level of the students, providing possible steps in the approach to the task is also useful as well as referring to “real world” examples (if appropriate) as starting point.
- Learning should be structured in such a way that theory and practice integration can be facilitated individually, in a small group or big class. To facilitate integrating theory and practice, students need to have opportunities for simulating interventions for “real world” situations. Lecturers are aware that resources (such as audio-visual and e-resources) that stimulate students’ critical thinking abilities and promote active learning are paramount. The challenge of using small group discussions (in a big class of 100 students or more) with the concomitant feedback is quite time consuming and inadequate learning outcomes are often achieved not commensurate with the time devoted to the task.
- Bridging courses for students from previously disadvantaged schools are now established at most universities, but only recently established in the Social Work programme at UWC. Morrow has noted barriers which impact on the performance of students from previously disadvantaged educational backgrounds (Dykes, 2009). One barrier in particular, namely epistemological access (or the prior knowledge that students have acquired through school or work) and students’ fit with academic (dominant) standards, is significant. Mgqwashu (2009) argues that academic literacy is the key factor in enabling students to traverse the academic minefield. The challenge is to develop a teaching and learning philosophy (in foundation programmes) that will enable students to overcome the disadvantages of previous

learning environments and increase the throughput rate within an appropriate time frame.

The research question focused on the challenges experienced by Social Work lecturers and third-year Social Work students in the Social Work Department at UWC with regard to the integration of theory and practice. It can be concluded that students did experience difficulties in integrating theory and practice. The first component of this difficulty centres on theory. Students felt overwhelmed by vast amounts of knowledge juxtaposed with their preferred learning style for assimilating segments of knowledge. This piecemeal approach to learning contrasted with the desire of lecturers to provide a detailed (in their view holistic) approach to learning. It is accepted that lecturers need to balance the learning needs and learning styles of their students with the learning outcomes of the programme. Scaffolding of learning is thus an important means whereby both parties can be satisfied. Only when the BSW degree is aligned (in terms of steps) across its many theory and practice modules with regard to content and assessment strategies can scaffolding be said to be in place. When scaffolding is in place, then “piecemeal” learning favoured by students would be part of the learning approach used by lecturers in terms of BSW alignment and the sometimes oppositional stance adopted by lecturers and students would be enormously reduced.

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